

Testimony of Jeffrey Steele

President and Chief Executive Officer, First Choice Health Centers Inc.

Chairs and distinguished members of the Human Services Committee:

My name is Jeffrey Steele and I am President and Chief Executive Officer of First Choice Health Centers Inc serving the communities of East Hartford, Manchester and Vernon. I am submitting this testimony related to HB 6616 AN ACT CONCERNING EXPANSION OF HUSKY HEALTH BENEFITS TO THOSE INELIGIBLE DUE TO IMMIGRATION STATUS.

In 2022, First Choice served 18,145 patients, which we specialize in providing care for traditionally underserved communities. As a federally qualified health center, First Choice does not turn people away based on their ability to pay for services, and patients have access to same-day medical, dental, behavioral health, and specialty services. First Choice provided health care services to 16,363 patients who fall under 200% of the federal poverty guideline in 2022. Included in the number above are 3,081 people who are uninsured and would have no other access to health care in the community.

We're immensely proud of the work that our health centers have done in protecting our communities from the coronavirus. Connecticut's community health centers have provided over 944,000 COVID tests and fully vaccinated over 409,000 residents between August of 2020 and May of 2022.

We submit this testimony on issues critical to protecting the integrity of Connecticut's health centers, and we welcome the legislature's support as we move through the process. We appreciate the opportunity to highlight the important work of Connecticut's health centers and policy initiatives that will fortify and enhance access to primary care.

Connecticut's health centers serve residents in every legislative district. Health centers operate over 100 locations throughout Connecticut and employ over 4,500 people (2) and have an estimated economic impact of over \$800 million (3).

¹ <https://www.nachc.org/research-and-data/covid-19-vaccine-testing-data-by-state/>

² 2021 UDS data

³ <https://www.nachc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Economic-Impact-Infographic-2.pdf>

HB 6616 will expand HUSKY coverage to undocumented residents through age 26. Expanding eligibility will equalize access to health care coverage and help reduce the uninsured rate in Connecticut.

Connecticut's health centers serve over 70,000 patients every year who are uninsured. Federally qualified health centers and emergency rooms are the only places where people without health insurance can receive healthcare. This model is not sustainable for patients or the healthcare system, and this bill is an important step in ensuring that fewer Connecticut residents go without healthcare coverage. Health centers treat many patients who are uninsured or underinsured and are familiar with the barriers to access for those without health insurance.

In 2021, Connecticut's health centers served over 2,500 patients from the migrant farmworker program and provided nearly \$2.9 million in translation services. Over 100,000 health center patients are best served in a language other than English, and we estimate that health centers currently serve 45,000 patients over the age of 18 who do not have health insurance (4). This bill would positively impact tens of thousands of health center patients by expanding their access to health insurance coverage.

Patients who are uninsured often have difficulty affording their care. Health centers work with these patients to manage costs using the "sliding fee scale (5)", and use federal, private, and other resources to cover the costs of care for these patients. Allowing more people to access HUSKY coverage will allow health centers to focus more intently on expanding services and enhance our ability to care for our most vulnerable patients. People who are undocumented need the same level of care as everyone else, and it is unreasonable to assume that the only care undocumented people will ever need will be from either a federally qualified health center or a hospital emergency room.

First Choice and CHCACT supports this bill and the intent of the legislature, and strongly encourages that this policy be further developed to include all undocumented immigrants in Connecticut. Thank you for raising this bill and giving me the opportunity to testify.

⁴ 2021 UDS data

⁵ <https://bphc.hrsa.gov/compliance/compliance-manual/chapter9>

Sincerely,

Jeffrey Steele

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